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ABSTRACT

This lesson explores the vision of childhood created by Lewis Carroll in "Alice in Wonderland." Students begin by looking at Carroll's photographs of the real Alice for whom Carroll imagined his story and compare the image of childhood that he captured on film with images of children in our culture. Then students read "Alice in Wonderland" with special attention to the illustrations that Carroll had made for his book, and explore the relationship between words and pictures by creating an Alice illustration of their own. Next, for contrast, students compare Carroll's vision of childhood with that presented by the Romantic poet William Blake in his illuminated "Songs of Innocence and Experience." Finally, students consider the interplay of image and text in their own favorite children's literature and how the vision of childhood presented there compares to their experiences as children. The lesson plan also contains the subject areas covered in the lesson, time required to complete the lesson, the skills used in the lesson, the grade level (6-12), and lists of the standards developed by professional or government associations that are related to the lesson, as well as activities to extend the lesson. (RS)

Childhood Through the Looking-Glass [Lesson Plan].

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Childhood Through the Looking-Glass

Introduction

This lesson explores the vision of childhood created by Lewis Carroll in *Alice in Wonderland*. Students begin by looking at Carroll's photographs of the real Alice for whom Carroll imagined his story and compare the image of childhood that he captured on film with images of children in our culture. Then students read *Alice in Wonderland* with special attention to the illustrations that Carroll had made for his book, and explore the relationship between words and pictures by creating an Alice illustration of their own. Next, for contrast, students compare Carroll's vision of childhood with that presented by the Romantic poet William Blake in his illuminated "Songs of Innocence and Experience." Finally, students consider the interplay of image and text in their own favorite children's literature and how the vision of childhood presented there compares to their experiences as children.

Learning Objectives

(1) To learn about Lewis Carroll and the vision of childhood he created in *Alice in Wonderland*; (2) To compare Carroll's Victorian world of childhood with the world of "Innocence and Experience" portrayed by the Romantic poet William Blake; (3) To explore the relationship between picture and text in children's literature; (4) To consider the relationship between childhood fictions and the real

[Literature: British](#)[Literature: Fiction](#)[Art: Visual Arts](#)

6-12

One to three class periods

visual art analysis

literary analysis

research skills

critical thinking

Internet skills

[NCTE/IRA List of
Standards for the English
Language Arts](#)

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experience of growing up.

Lesson Plan

1 Whether they have read *Alice in Wonderland* or not, most students will probably have some familiarity with the story. Begin by having them talk about their thoughts, memories, and knowledge of Lewis Carroll's classic. Do they know when it was written? What do they know about the author? From what they know of her, does Alice seem like a "real" child to them? Do they identify with the character and her experiences?

2 Explain to students that *Alice in Wonderland* began as an improvised story told to a real little girl named Alice Liddell by a man named Charles Dodgson, which was the real name of Lewis Carroll. Provide a brief introduction to Carroll's life and his relationship with Alice Liddell, drawing on the resources available through EDSITEMent at the [Victorian Web](#) website. Click "Literature" on the website's homepage, then select "Authors discussed in the Victorian Web" and click "Lewis Carroll" for a link to a short [Biography](#).

- Share with students some of Carroll's photographs of Alice Liddell. For links to several sites that feature Carroll's photographs of Alice, go to the [Victorian Web](#) homepage, click "Literature," then select "Authors discussed in the Victorian Web" and click "Lewis Carroll"; click "Works" for a link to the [Lewis Carroll Home Page](#), and then click [Photography](#).
- Discuss the vision of childhood that Carroll offers in his photographs. How does it compare to students' impressions of the world of *Alice in Wonderland*? Is this childhood as it appears to an adult or as children see it? Is it realistic? fantastic? sentimental?
- To sharpen students' awareness of the image of childhood Carroll captured on film, have them compare his photographs to present-day images of children. Ask them to describe advertisements that feature children, such as those familiar from catalogs for children's clothing, and the visions of childhood offered by television and film. Again, consider whether these reflect an adult or a child's point of view. What sort of story do these images tell about being a kid today? What sort of story is Carroll telling in his photographs? How does that story compare to the story he

1. Students read a wide range of print and nonprint texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; ([more](#))
2. Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions (e.g., philosophical, ethical, aesthetic) of human experience. ([more](#))
3. Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. ([more](#))
6. Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and nonprint texts. ([more](#))
7. Students conduct research on issues and interests by generating ideas and questions, and by posing problems. ([more](#))
8. Students use a variety of technological and information resources (e.g., libraries, databases, computer networks, video) to gather and synthesize information and to create and communicate knowledge. ([more](#))
11. Students participate as knowledgeable, reflective, creative, and critical members of a variety of literacy communities. ([more](#))

National Council for the Social Studies

2. Time, Continuity, and Change ([more](#))
4. Individual Development and Identity ([more](#))

tells in *Alice in Wonderland*?

- For background on the "myth of childhood" in the Victorian era, click "Literature" on the [Victorian Web](#) homepage, then select "Literary Genres and Modes" and click "Autobiography" for short essays on [Beginnings, Myths of Childhood](#), and [Autobiography and Childhood as a Personal Myth in Autobiography](#).

3 Next, have students read *Alice in Wonderland*, with its original illustrations by Sir John Tenniel. For an electronic edition, click "Literature" on the [Victorian Web](#) homepage, then select "Authors discussed in the Victorian Web" and click "Lewis Carroll"; click "Works" for a link to the "Lewis Carroll Home Page," and there click "On-line Texts," then select [Gutenberg Alice](#), [Looking-glass](#), and [Snark](#).

- Explain to students that Carroll closely supervised the illustrations in his book. They are not simply decorations, in other words, but part of his story, an extension of his fiction. (For background on this point, click "Literature" on the [Victorian Web](#) homepage, then select "Authors discussed in the Victorian Web," click "Lewis Carroll" and then click [Visual Arts](#).)
- As they read *Alice in Wonderland*, have students make comparisons. How does the Alice in the text compare with the Alice in the illustrations? How do both compare with the Alice of Carroll's photographs? What is the vision of childhood that each conveys? Could the illustrations in Alice be telling a different story from the text? How?
- To see Alice and its illustrations in a different light, introduce students to *The Nursery Alice*, a version of the story that Carroll prepared for very young children. For an electronic text of *The Nursery Alice*, click "Literature" on the [Victorian Web](#) homepage, then select "Authors discussed in the Victorian Web" and click "Lewis Carroll"; click "Works" for a link to the "Lewis Carroll Home Page," and there click "On-line Texts," then select [The Nursery Alice](#). What is the relationship between text and illustration in this telling of the story? What vision of childhood does Carroll offer here?
- Have students produce their own illustrations for *Alice in Wonderland*, choosing an episode or even an object described in the text. When they have finished, discuss how the process of finding a passage to illustrate and forming a visual impression based on the text opens a new perspective on the story. What stands out in this perspective? What is more difficult to visualize and why?

4 To provide a contrast to the Victorian view of childhood behind Carroll's storytelling, have students look at the very different vision offered by the Romantic poet William Blake in his "Songs of Innocence and Experience." An electronic text of this book, with Blake's illustrations, is available through EDSITEment at the [Romantic Circles](#) website. Click "Scholarly Resources" on the website's homepage, then scroll down to the heading "Contemporaries" and click [The William Blake Archive](#).

- Compare, for example, Blake's contrasting visions of childhood in the two poems titled "The Chimney Sweeper," one from the "Songs of Innocence" (plate 20) and the other from the "Songs of Experience" (plate 46). How are these

National Standards for Arts Education

Visual Arts

3. Choosing and evaluating a range of subject matter, symbols, and ideas ([more](#))
4. Understanding the visual arts in relation to history and cultures ([more](#))
5. Reflecting upon and assessing the characteristics and merits of their work and the work of others ([more](#))
6. Making connections between visual arts and other disciplines ([more](#))

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two visions related? As dream and reality? As spiritual and worldly? As a child's view of childhood and a view of childhood from adulthood? For reading texts of these poems, click "Related Sites" at the homepage of **The William Blake Archive** website, then click "Selected Poetry of William Blake" and select "The Chimney Sweeper," numbers 5 and 6 in the index.

- Discuss how the alternative visions that Blake presents compare with the vision of childhood in *Alice in Wonderland*. Does Carroll present a vision midway between the extremes envisioned by Blake? Or does he combine these visions to some extent by creating a fantastic world around a realistic little girl?

5 Conclude this lesson by having students look at the illustrations in their own favorite books from childhood -- Dr. Seuss books, *Charlotte's Web*, the *Little House on the Prairie* series, etc. Discuss the vision of childhood presented by the authors they loved. How does that vision compare to their experiences as children? How would they change these illustrations to reflect those experiences?

Extending the Lesson

Explore a related aspect of the Victorian sensibility by introducing students to the tradition of fairy painting that developed during the era, and to Victorian illustrations of fairy tales. For background on fairy paintings, go to the **Victorian Web** homepage and click "Visual Arts," then under the heading "Painting" click **Fairy Painting**. For background on fairy tale illustrations, look under the heading "Illustration" for links to **Realism and Sentimentality in Victorian Fairy Tale Illustrations** and **The Fantastic in Victorian Fairy Tale Illustrations**.